

# The accidentals

## Herbert Eppel describes his somewhat unconventional route into translation, and introduces colleagues who also successfully re-steered their careers into the profession



Herbert Eppel is a chartered engineer with a German degree in building physics. He originally comes from Heidelberg, but has been living and working in the UK since 1988. Herbert diversified into freelance translation around 1995 and joined ITI in 2003. He translates texts from a wide range of technical and scientific subjects from English into German and (latterly predominantly) from German into English. His website is: [www.HETtranslation.co.uk](http://www.HETtranslation.co.uk)

Following an 'interview' I recently gave for the *Netzblatt* (quarterly newsletter of the ITI German Network) in my capacity as GerNet Treasurer, my career as a translator was deemed sufficiently unconventional (and therefore hopefully interesting) to merit a *Bulletin* article. Rather than spending a whole article pontificating about myself, I was very pleased about the Editor's suggestion of including 'case studies' from colleagues I have worked with over the years.

The unconventionality of my career has two aspects. Firstly, I don't have any formal language qualifications (apart from ITI membership, of course, and the equivalent of English A-level), and secondly (perhaps shockingly for some readers), I translate in both language directions – in fact the majority of my work is from German into English these days, rather than the other way round.

Here's the background: after a school trip to London back in 1977, my first proper experience of Britain started in the autumn of 1984 when I arrived in London in a clapped-out VW beetle to start a six-month student placement at multi-disciplinary building and infrastructure consulting firm Ove Arup & Partners. I didn't know a soul in London, and in particular no fellow Germans. In terms of my English language skills, this was no doubt a blessing, because it prevented me from fraternising in my mother tongue and forced me to speak, read and write English solidly for several months.

During the further course of my Building Physics degree at

Fachhochschule für Technik in Stuttgart (now known as University of Applied Sciences), I worked at Fraunhofer Institute for Building Physics as a student assistant on an International Energy Agency project involving thermal simulation of buildings. Subsequently, this enabled me to take up a research fellow post in 1988 at the then Leicester Polytechnic (now De Montfort University), where I was involved in a wide range of building-related research and indeed consulting activities, and also in setting up a new MSc course in Energy and Sustainable Development, bringing my voluntary work as energy campaigner for Leicester Friends of the Earth to professional fruition. I also gained an MPhil in building simulation, and became a Chartered Engineer and a member of the Energy Institute.

### Alternative career

However, deep down I suppose I always knew that I'm not really an academic, and I therefore started to look for alternatives outside university. Turning down a job offer as a consulting engineer in London (I was horrified by the prospect of becoming a long-distance commuter, and house-hunting in London didn't really

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have too much appeal either), I eventually turned my mind to translation.

In hindsight, I suppose I also need to be grateful to my academic supervisor (and later boss) for tirelessly (and at times no doubt excessively) wielding his dreaded red pen over my conference paper and thesis drafts – after all, in a translation environment it certainly pays to be pedantic or at least meticulous!

From a technology point of view, my academic environment kind of gave me a head start in translation, because unlike the 'outside world' I had already been familiar with email since 1988, while other translators and agencies alike struggled with cumbersome number-based modem connections. I also witnessed the emergence of the internet at first hand and, having spent/wasted many hours on frustrating paper-based library searches, I quickly learned to appreciate the potential of the new technology for my emerging new career.

Translation work soon began to pick up, although the real boost, in terms of both productivity and job satisfaction, came once I had discovered Déjà Vu. The IT know-how gained during my work at university was certainly a great bonus – after all, freelance translators usually also have to be their own IT system administrators, which can be quite a challenging job in itself at times!

For reasons I'm not quite clear about in retrospect, my first few years as a translator were spent almost in a kind of 'solitary confinement', in other words it took me a long time to realise the benefits of networking and of ITI membership. Rather than waiting to meet the criteria for full ITI membership, I really should have become an Associate much earlier. The same applies to membership of the ITI German Network, which I find invaluable, not only for discussing terminology-related issues, but also for more general cultural discussions or indeed light-hearted distraction from some of the more boring translation jobs.

As for translating out of one's mother tongue, this still seems to be so controversial that a recent *Bulletin* article included the following advice for would-be project managers: '... a

translator always translates only into his or her mother tongue'. Fortunately for me, many direct clients and (increasingly, perhaps) agencies adopt a somewhat more flexible and (dare I say it?) enlightened approach that is based on references, experience and quality, rather than a single, rigid principle.

A classic example of inconsistency in this respect was provided by ITI itself. When I applied for ITI membership I was given the option of joining for English to German via assessment of previous work (ie without exam). For German to English I was given the option of joining at the lower 'self-assessed' grade, or by exam. For some mysterious reason, my request to join by assessment for German to English was linked to a requirement to take the exam in both directions, which I declined.

In any case, having now been an ITI member for four years and a BDÜ member for just over one year, there can be little doubt that membership of a professional body is an invaluable asset when it comes to establishing links with potential new customers

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(both agencies and direct clients alike). This is particularly true of the ITI website.

What general lessons can be learned from all this? I'm not sure really, but certain key messages are perhaps beginning to crystallise out of the experiences reported by myself and my colleagues:

■ Anyone who might be frustrated with their current employment situation but has at least some form of language background and a meticulous disposition could do worse than thinking about translation as an alternative career path which, in the right circumstances, can turn out to be highly rewarding and offer exceptionally high job satisfaction levels.

■ Qualification, qualification, qualification. For anyone starting out

## TIPS & TRICKS

- Don't be afraid (or even embarrassed) to be pedantic or at least meticulous – it can actually be a significant asset!
- Qualification matters: any qualification (translation-related or otherwise) is likely to be a bonus.
- Join any ITI networks which are of interest/relevance to your specialism/language/geographical area – they will provide a basis for establishing contacts in your new work and are a wonderful source of advice and support.
- For clients, in particular agencies: don't rigidly insist on translations into the mother tongue and/or a language degree. You might miss out on highly experienced translators offering high-quality translations.
- For translators' associations: ensure that rules are consistent and fair and don't disadvantage 'out of mother tongue' translators or translators without a language-related degree.

as a translator later in life, any qualifications of whatever kind will no doubt come in very useful sooner or later in their new career path.

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